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The Sports Scene in Russia

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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This is the first year since 1964 that I have not been in the United States for the World Series. This year I left the country in the middle of the series, missing Games Five and Six. Unable to hear or see the final games I settled for BBC radio reports which I heard last Friday afternoon and Sunday morning in Moscow. The reports were sketchy but I did know that Curt Shilling had shut out the Blue Jays 2-0 on Thursday to send the Series back to Toronto.

Then on Sunday morning I heard the BBC report that Joe Carter had homered in the ninth inning to give the Jays their second World Series victory in succession. The reporter said that Paul Molitor had been Series MVP and this was certainly no surprise. There was no indication who was pitching for the Phillies at the end, but I just knew it had to have been the Wild Thing.

And so began my altogether too short stay in Russia, away from, but not completely out of touch with sport. In Moscow the evidences of American sport are many, with perhaps the most interesting from a cultural point of view the fact that American sports teams have established a heavy visual presence in the city. Among the young in Moscow wearing a team shirt or jacket has become an important fashion statement. In a matter of a couple of hours one afternoon I saw the team shirts or jackets of the Chicago Bulls, Bears, and White Sox, the Washington Redskins, the Louisville Cardinals, UCLA, and the Los Angeles Lakers and Kings. In addition many young men wore Addis and Nike jackets, sweat pants, or work out coordinates. In one open market I even saw matrushka dolls of the Dream Team.

If the fortunes of these teams are followed, or whether the wearer even knows the team belonging to the colors is doubtful outside of Michael Jordan and the Bulls. More likely this is simply part of the larger American pop culture invasion of Russia spearheaded by pop music, Michael Jackson, and MTV. Perhaps the only more disturbing thing I saw was Jimmy Swaggert on Moscow television. It is good to know that while America has taken great literature, music and art from Russia, we have given them in return loud music, Santa Barbara, and TV evangelism.

Going some 600 plus miles east of Moscow to Izhevsk the sound of pop music is still strong in the air, but the American team logo phenomenon is subdued. It is here that I learned first hand about the consequences of Perestroika and Glasnost for sport.

The great and powerful centralized Soviet Sports machine has been abandoned, and what is left is a decentralized and increasingly privatized sport establishment. Many of the world class coaches have gone to the West in pursuit of dollars, while the Big Red Machine has been turned into a little red wagon.

The end of the centralized control of sport has been welcomed by some, but unfortunately it was accompanied by the raw reality that sport, like all other aspects of life in the capitalist economy, must be able to generate its own revenues. In a struggling economy with little budget for advertising and promotional campaigns, the search for sponsorships is difficult. In Izhevsk the men's basketball coach at Udmurt State University has contracted with a local bank whose logo flies in the gymnasium, while bank employees get access to University athletic facilities.

In addition memberships are sold for the workout room and the swimming pool. Privatization has come hard on top of other financial troubles in the university system. And unlike the United States the big money is not there in sports television.

The gymnastics coach likes the new freedom of Russia, but remains caught up in nostalgia for the centralized financing of the old system, and the world class gymnastics teams that were the result.

There is no longer the great sports machine, but there still is sport for all, and perhaps that more than anything else is what needs to be salvaged from the old system. The students of the University are put through mandatory physical conditioning classes. We saw a women's class of humanities students in the weight room.

What is new in Russian sport is the emergence of the professional as distinguished from the amateur, the need to raise money rather than live off state subsidy. While this transition proceeds there will be problems like the ice rink that can not afford to maintain its ice. But in the end what may survive, sport for all, could be more important than any other issue.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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